

# *Literary Theory, The University, and Society*

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THE STUDY of literature has long been an academic subject in the narrow sense of the phrase. It has had its place in schools and universities, but a student majoring in English or French literature rarely anticipated finding employment in the field except within the academy, or perhaps in publishing where the business was closely related to academic work. Certainly discoveries in literary history or developments in literary theory found little application in the larger world of work, or even, for the most part, in disciplines outside those of literature inside the academy. The study of literature was a placid inlet of the larger academic sea.

All that has changed now — suddenly and dramatically — although most people remain unaware of either the nature or the extent of that change. As an American specialist in the history of nineteenth-century Russian literature with a particular interest in the history of literary and critical doctrines of that period, I have certain qualifications for tracing the course of these new developments, particularly within contemporary American culture.

Literary study characteristically deals with written texts for the most part produced by individuals who regard themselves as writers: that is, persons particularly adept at using the language in

which they work. Poets are most committed to the subtleties of language, although prose-writers can on occasion produce works of great complexity. Thus it is natural that literary critics and academic specialists in literature should display a strong interest in language and in texts, and especially in the structure and interpretation — or meaning — of texts.

In the nineteenth century, however, critics tended to read literary texts as statements about life, and to discuss them from that angle. One prominent nineteenth-century Russian critic (Apollon Grigorev) even held that there could be no such thing as a structural analysis of a literary text. But he turned out to be quite wrong about that: in our century literary theory, including structural analysis, has blossomed profusely. Indeed the Russian Formalist critics of the 1920s were among the first to treat literary texts as artifacts in their own right, combinations of literary devices which formed wholes and then entered upon an independent existence outside the context of the time in which they were produced. Although the Formalist movement was thoroughly suppressed in its homeland, the ideas which inspired it came to fruition in many other lands, including the United States. Indeed, as this century draws to a close we can

discern that the American mind, which once seemed so practical and down-to-earth, can in fact be rigidly theoretical in such areas as literary theory.

Yale University has nurtured the theoretical movements which have dominated the scene recently within the American academy. Their early stages seemed innocent enough, as when, immediately after World War II, Yale sheltered the critical movement known as the "New Criticism," which focused its attention on poetry as the most literary of genres and which enjoyed the adherence of such giants of scholarship as Cleanth Brooks, René Wellek, and William K. Wimsatt Jr. The "New Critics" sought to study literary texts for their own sakes, and not primarily as documents providing information about, say, the lives of their authors, or about the historical situations of the times in which they were composed. In short, the New Critics downgraded the extrinsic study of literature, which had been so widely accepted before then. They insisted upon close reading of texts, upon careful dissection of rhyme and metric schemes in poems, upon the elucidation of literary echoes and references, and upon understanding why authors might have chosen particular words or phrases in preference to others. The New Critics thus shifted decisively away from reading literary texts as statements about reality, and toward reading them simply as texts. By their sense of the great Western cultural tradition, by their learning and their intellectual responsibility, the New Critics truly revitalized the study of literature in the American academy at mid-century.

And yet at the same time the New Criticism contained within itself the seeds of the destructive developments of the last 20 years. One of those seeds was the conviction that the study of literature required an explicit theoretical foundation. In 1942 René Wellek and Austin Warren published their *Theory of Litera-*

*ture*, which dominated the field in the 1950s at Yale and other institutions influenced by Yale. Wellek and Warren popularized the trend toward theory, and although they kept their theorizing within quite reasonable bounds, those who came after them recognized few restraints.

Aside from the general notion of the desirability of creating a theory of literature, the New Critics also opened some specific theoretical breaches which contemporary theoreticians have widened to the point of absurdity. Perhaps the most important of these breaches was the New Critical attack on what they termed the "intentional fallacy," or the view that the intentions of a text's author should be controlling in later defining the meaning of a text. In their *Theory of Literature* Wellek and Warren denied that readers are "bound" by the intentions of authors. They maintained that

... for most works of art we have no evidence to reconstruct the intentions of the author except the finished work itself. Even if we are in possession of contemporary evidence in the form of an explicit profession of intentions, such a profession need not be binding on a modern observer. "Intentions" of the author are always "rationalizations"....If we could have interviewed Shakespeare he probably would have expressed his intentions in writing *Hamlet* in a way which we should find most unsatisfactory. We would still quite rightly insist on finding meanings in *Hamlet* (and not merely inventing them) which were probably far from clearly formulated in Shakespeare's conscious mind.

Here Wellek and Warren set forth the notion that a text may have multiple meanings, not all of which were consciously formulated by its author.

A related idea was propounded by William K. Wimsatt, Jr., in his collection of essays published in 1954 under the title *The Verbal Icon* (although Wimsatt speaks of the aesthetic success of a text rather than its meaning, the latter is usu-

ally comprehended within the former). Wimsatt begins the first essay of his volume with a critique of the "romantic" concept that "in order to judge the poet's performance, we must know *what he intended*." Wimsatt sets his face against any such notion, holding that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for the judging of the success of a work of art." However, Wimsatt also limited this statement to poetic works:

Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and "bugs" from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention. They are more abstract than poetry.

"Practical messages," then, are not to be judged as aesthetically successful, like a poetic text: their meaning is defined by their author's intention. Wellek and Warren greatly weaken the link between authorial intention and the meaning of a poetic text; Wimsatt entirely breaks that link for a poetic texts, although not for practical texts. Still, the fundamental damage has now been done, and by the New Critics.

In the 1960s and 1970s Yale's New Critics were succeeded by a new school of "deconstructionists" which included such theoreticians as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man. Their school of thought has become remarkably influential throughout the American academy, although the original cluster of theoreticians at Yale no longer exists. The core idea of deconstructionism has been formulated by its advocates in such statements as the following:

Deconstructive discourse, in criticism, in philosophy, or in poetry itself, undermines the referential status of the language being deconstructed. (J. Hillis Miller)

To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts. (Jonathan Culler)

These and other definitions of deconstruction have in common the notion that an author is in principle incapable of expressing his meaning through language, that language actively subverts his meaning even as he writes so that he cannot say what he wishes to say, that the meaning of a text is precisely the opposite of what it seems to be, that all interpretation is misinterpretation. In short, the deconstructionists argue that any text, whether literary or not, is devoid of "canonical" meaning, or alternatively, that a reader may attribute any meaning he wishes to a text.

Formulated thus baldly, the deconstructionist position is so absurd that even most academics would reject it. And yet each component of deconstructionist doctrine, if kept within limits, can be supported by reasonable arguments: the deconstructionists simply take them to extremes. Everyone who has ever set pen to paper knows how difficult it is to express one's thoughts precisely and grammatically. Some writers revise their texts numerous times, editors labor over the manuscripts of their authors, all in order to gain control over a refractory language which resists our efforts to shape it. And yet we know that most of the time writers do manage to express themselves clearly — the best writers write most successfully — and only the extremist mind can hold that language itself always subverts our intent. To be sure, despite our best efforts an ambiguous expression may slip through which permits our intent to be interpreted in two or more quite different ways. Indeed poets and novelists may deliberately employ ambiguity for aesthetic ends, but from this we cannot legitimately conclude that all texts are so ambiguous as to be meaningless.

Furthermore, occasionally a text may mean the precise opposite of what it seems to, as when one indulges in thoroughgoing sarcasm: I may write "John is a fine fellow" when it is clear from the context that I really consider John a scoundrel. But it is unacceptable to shift from such examples to the conclusion that a text always means the opposite of what it appears to. Indeed, ambiguity, sarcasm, and other such elements in a text are of significance precisely because the text as a whole must be taken as having a canonical meaning or finite cluster of related meanings clearly linked to its author's intentions in composing it. If the sentence "John loves Mary" may mean (1) what it appears to mean, or (2) "John hates Mary," or (3) "A whale is a mammal," then the whole idea of a culture transmitted through language must be abandoned, and our entire command of reality, not to speak of the search for truth to which the university is dedicated, is fatally subverted. A university as an intellectual enterprise must be founded upon the assumption that written texts have certain discoverable meanings, even if they are multiple and not easily discerned.

Therein lies the larger danger of deconstructionist theory, which might seem at first glance to apply only to certain esoteric nooks of literary study. For, if we except certain natural sciences which use mathematics as a descriptive language, and also the fine arts, then both the university as a whole and society in general rest upon the assumption that it is possible to assign meanings to texts, including quite practical texts. The military depends upon written and spoken orders; businesses exchange innumerable memoranda, and government relies upon torrents of words. The entire legal structure of our society depends upon laws which exist in the form of written texts which lawyers and judges are employed to interpret. If the text of a

law has no definable meaning, then our government becomes a government of men and not of law: what is legal depends upon the individual interpreting the law at a given time. This was one of the roots of the dispute over Judge Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court of the United States. Judge Bork, perhaps the most famous exponent of the doctrine of "original intent" as applied to the Constitution, holds that existing constitutional texts were written by legislators with certain intentions; that those intentions are in principle discoverable through analysis of the texts and related documents; and that these intentions should play a vital, if not controlling, role in the contemporary application of constitutional law. Here the errors of literary theoreticians return to haunt us with a vengeance, for they provide the ultimate rationale for the radical subversion of an entire culture based upon written laws. They justify the Supreme Court of the United States in discovering a right of privacy in the "penumbra" of the Constitution, and sustain a relatively conservative nominee to the Supreme Court, David Souter, in referring to certain "unenumerated" rights to be found in the Constitution, rights which by definition are not in its text but which the interpreter wishes were there.

Still, deconstruction in its pure form is an impossible philosophy: if everyone truly believed in it our society would grind to a halt, for there could be no communication among its members. When Jacques Derrida, the French theoretician of the deconstructionist movement, held forth at a recent Humanities conference on the need for greater financial support for the Humanities in this country (by which he meant study from a deconstructionist perspective), he abandoned irony and ambiguity: he meant exactly what he said. As a practical matter, even the most inveterate deconstructionist cannot act upon his

theories in most spheres of life. Nature abhors a vacuum. People in general cannot do without some sort of meaning to their texts.

If, then, texts must have meaning, and if meaning cannot be established through objective investigation of their authors' intentions in writing, then readers must assign meaning to texts, and on the basis of political criteria. This explains the appearance over the past few years of a number of schools of critical interpretation which assign meanings to texts on the basis of particular political approaches.

Senior among these critical schools are the Marxists, who have gained new prominence in the American academy at the very time their star is on the wane in Eastern Europe and other parts of the globe. The Marxists view literature as part of social history, as a weapon in the class struggle which, they think, moves history: it is a means through which the exploited proletariat struggles against the capitalist class. Literary texts are acceptable only to the extent that they support revolutionary political objectives, and their meanings are defined in terms of the class struggle. A character in Maxim Gorky's classic play of down-and-outers, *The Lower Depths* (1902), asks at one point: what is truth? (we might say: meaning), and replies: "Where's the truth? ... No work, no strength, not even a place to live. The only thing left is to die like a dog! This is the truth!" This is the essence of a political definition of truth. Under the high Stalinist political system, truth was whatever that supreme political instrument, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, said it was at the moment. And that is why it is not surprising that Yale's Paul de Man, a pillar of deconstructionism, should have been an adherent of Fascism in his native Belgium during the war years: he always believed in the political definition of meaning.

The Feminists have also offered their readings of deconstructed literary texts:

they seek to demonstrate that literary culture is simply an instrumentality for men's consistent oppression of women throughout history. Works which support notions of women's rights are to be revived or resurrected, whereas works which depict women in inferior roles are to be consigned to the rubbish heap.

There is also the New Historicism, which is linked to Marxism. The New Historicism holds that literary texts are not the products of individual writers but rather social artifacts, and that in any case a modern reader cannot genuinely enter into the mind of a reader contemporary to older works, but must read them in the light of today's beliefs, simply accepting the radical discontinuities between present and earlier epochs. This movement holds that we cannot reconstruct the original meaning of a text, but only its original ideology; then we may investigate how that work supported the existing ideological network of the time in which it was created.

There exist still other methodologies of reading founded on political assumptions, and there is no reason why others should not come into existence in the future also, since the ground has been well prepared for them. At any rate, we can now see clearly the path by which we have arrived at our present condition. First, the study of literature reaches a stage at which it is felt to require a "theory": the New Critics met that need. Second, one maintains that in theory an author cannot assign objective meaning to a text, and that a reader is entitled to discover within it meanings which may never have occurred to the author: the New Critics took us this far, but no farther. The deconstructionist theoreticians took the third step when they maintained that no definable meaning can be derived from a text at all, that language actively subverts any author's attempt to infuse a text with meaning. The last step is to reinsert meaning through the



reader: now the reader rather than the author assigns meaning to a text. It is understood, of course, that the reader must adopt the proper political approach to it.

None of these notions taken individually is especially new. One of the most famous lines by the nineteenth-century Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev is proto-deconstructionist in its thrust: "A thought expressed is but a lie" (although the very fact that he can communicate this idea to us contradicts his statement). As for the political definition of meaning, the mid-nineteenth century Russian radical critic Nikolay Shelgunov once argued that even intelligence had to be politically defined. "Only man who thinks along lines leading to the common good [*i.e.*, politically acceptably] may be considered genuinely intelligent," he wrote in 1871. But if the ideas which have gained such currency lately are individually not new, the consistency of their elaboration and the energy behind their promulgation have made them a formidable force in our cultural life. They also partake of the obsessive drive of political convictions viewed as moral imperatives, and thus spread cancerously through our culture. It would have been bad enough had these theories remained within the confines of literary scholarship. In fact, however, they have displayed an alarming tendency to spread to all areas of our culture dependent upon the written word, and a remarkable ability to obtain material support from the established institutions of the culture which they subvert.

An instructive example of this last is the attempt to establish a doctoral program in "Human Sciences" at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. In 1989 an interdisciplinary Committee to Develop and Propose a Revised Graduate Program in the Human Sciences submitted a report to the Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at George Washington. This document was

brought before the faculty of the Graduate School for its approval in late April of 1990.

The Committee did not conceal its enthusiasm for the "theoretical" developments in the study of literature which have taken place over the last 30 years. That progress, it maintained,

has allowed the humanist to trespass on social- scientific territory (raising economic or social questions in literature, anthropological questions in philosophy, etc.); it has also allowed the social sciences to take an interest in the humanities (sociology of knowledge, sociolinguistics, socio- criticism, etc.). Out of these theoretical developments have come the *Human Sciences*, which share in the objects of the social sciences but insist on seeing those objects as "human practices" rather than "natural events." In this sense, the Human Sciences are continuous with the old Humanities, but they are sciences because they have genuine theoretical (if not quantitative) content. They advance hypotheses and draw conclusions and test these against evidence, usually textual. They are sciences of the world of the text rather than the natural world.

Certain points in this exposition deserve comment. For one thing, the Human Sciences claim to be the core discipline of both the Humanities and the Social Sciences as traditionally understood, for all these disciplines share a dependence upon texts as their basic materials. Thus the proponents of the Human Sciences seek to blur if not absolutely to dissolve the demarcation lines between the traditional disciplines in the long run. For the time being, to be sure, the program in Human Sciences modestly presents itself as nothing more than the transdisciplinary core around which doctoral programs in the traditional Humanities fields will fit as "modules or sub-fields." The Committee's report has little use for the traditional Humanities disciplines. "The 'traditional,' positivistic or (pseudo)historical approach," it declares, "has been replaced by discourse

and genre studies and, in general, by a radical remapping of the fields." The faculty to be appointed to this program are by no means those who are steeped in the subject-matter of their disciplines unless they also hew to the currently fashionable theoretical line: "Faculty members who participate in the program should be actively engaged in the forms of research that have radically changed the field of the Humanities in the last thirty years. Mere volume of work without theoretical grounding will not qualify." The policy embedded in the last sentence would exclude eminent scholars who have sought to interpret literary texts or follow historical evidence toward the truth as they understood it, without theoretical preconceptions. Now theory is to take explicit precedence over the search for evidence and its even-handed interpretation.

The Committee report also remarks that the Human Sciences are "sciences of the world of the text rather than the natural world." Put another way, texts are to be divorced from any objective referents; they are to be viewed as intellectual constructs with which we may "play" very much as we wish. At one point the Committee report says in so many words that the theoretical courses it envisions "aim at unfolding not necessarily the uniqueness of a text, but its plurality." In short, a proper analysis of a text will reveal that it has a multiplicity of meanings, or to reverse the approach, that it has no more or less single and determinable meaning. The Committee report also makes it clear that the new theoreticians display no particular respect for the established denotations of language, or even the definitions of words to be found in dictionaries. "Texts may vary from semester to semester," we are told.

Although in literature programs the texts chosen will be mostly (although not exclusively) "literary," the format of the course

may be extended to other disciplines, and the nature of the texts may vary accordingly (films, essays, philosophical works, paintings, buildings, cities, etc.).

If a building or a city may be viewed as a text, then so may virtually anything else, and the distinction which the report's authors made earlier between the "natural world" and the "world of the text" dissolves. Soon even the natural world is to be subjected to deconstruction, and indeed deconstructionist ideas have already begun to influence certain American architects.

The heart of the Human Sciences program as proposed lies in its theoretical courses. "Core [theoretical] courses are obligatory and cannot be waived or replaced by any other type of graduate work done at George Washington or at any other institution," we read. By contrast, the report's attitude toward courses in the traditional disciplines is rather relaxed: substitutions are very much in order here. The proposed core courses do make an obeisance toward the traditional understanding of literary study with a course in the "History of Literary Criticism" beginning with Plato and Aristotle. But most of the proposed core courses deal with quite contemporary topics, such as genre theory and critical reading. The types of theoretical approaches enumerated are predictable: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, contemporary Marxist theory, Feminism, Reader response, Psychoanalytic theory. The theoreticians singled out for exemplary mention are just as predictable, for they include Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes.

In sum, the proposal of the Committee on Human Sciences calls for the institutionalization within the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of a major Humanities program with an intellectually destructive and thoroughly politicized core.

Scholars who disagree with the cluster of doctrines enshrined within it, or even those who simply wish to follow the evidence wherever it leads, could find no place within it. The program would also, in all likelihood, expand to such a degree that in time humanities scholars of an atheoretical or antitheoretical bent could find few places available within the university in general.

The presentation of the Committee report to the faculty generated considerable controversy. An "Ad Hoc Committee Against a Doctoral Program in Human Sciences," of which I was one of seven members, issued a statement in opposition to the program. It objected to the proposal on the grounds that "theoretical constructs (of the type embedded in this program) tend to expand cancerously from literary texts to philosophical texts to the texts of laws to the physical world around us, and to leave us incapable of a rationally objective interpretation of reality." Two natural scientists circulated a statement arguing that the program should not be termed "scientific" since it did not and could not employ the language of mathematics, although three of their colleagues in the natural sciences issued a statement defending its "innovative ideas" and "modern approaches to humanistic studies" and urging the faculty to approve the proposal.

When the faculty gathered on April 27, 1990, it was apparent that opinion was sharply divided, and that a great many faculty had more or less severe reservations about the proposal as then formulated. A major indicator of faculty dissatisfaction was the unanimous approval of an amendment deleting most of the requirement that faculty in the program be only those with a theoretical background. But the faculty also, in the end, anxious not to offend those of their colleagues who had invested their intellectual pres-

tige in the proposal, approved a motion favoring "the development of an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in Human Sciences, but [referring] this document to a broader committee for further elaboration of details in consultation with appropriate departments and faculty." The discontent with the proposal was so poorly articulated that the faculty did not perceive that the requirement of faculty and student dedication to problems of contemporary literary theory was fundamental to the entire project: if it is genuinely deleted, then the point of the program is lost.

The outcome of this effort to institutionalize the study and elaboration of radical literary doctrine at the George Washington University remains in doubt. The faculty's instincts in objecting to the original proposal were sound, but their understanding of its philosophical foundations was blurred. The faculty committee which proposed it had the advantage, not only of its own prestige, but also of the strong backing of the man then Dean of the Graduate School, who on occasion acted as its advocate from the chair, although he also gave its opponents fair opportunity to be heard. But that Dean also appointed the committee to revise the program, which will be presented again to the faculty. If its proponents are clever, they will make tactical ideological adjustments sufficient to allow it to slip past a faculty already on record as accepting the principle of such an interdisciplinary program. Once it is in place, any prohibition against selecting only faculty in tune with the program's radical philosophical presuppositions will be forgotten. A system of reading texts which denies them any objective meaning will have received the moral support and financial backing of an institution which proclaims its dedication to the discovery of truth.



# *What Is Wrong With History?*

*Grady McWhiney*

NOTHING IS WRONG with history; it remains what it was when I started my academic career forty years ago—the most comprehensive account of our past but only a partial record of our doings. Just before his death in the 1960s, my old mentor Francis Butler Simkins asked me to “help defend toleration of the past, which [he believed to be] . . . the chief duty of the historian.”

Tolerating the past means more than trying to understand history; it means respecting the values and beliefs of people who lived in distant times and places. Historians, who by the nature of their work are conservatives, live most of their lives in the past, yet too many of them attempt to insert modern social and political views into earlier times. They distort past beliefs and actions and manipulate history for their own purposes. In his brilliant study of the intellectual origins of the Constitution, Forrest McDonald warned against using “concepts and information that were not available to his eighteenth-century subjects.” Pointing out “that eighteenth-century Americans were sometimes uninformed about the past, including their own past,” he observed that “they acted on the basis of their own knowledge and understanding, not ours.”

Cynics say that it is understandable

why misusers of history easily bamboozle modern Americans, who have little regard, less understanding, and no toleration for history. But like most generalizations this one is more facile than correct. Americans are remarkably ignorant of history; even so, they are not uninterested when it is effectively presented. In the fall of 1990 fourteen million Americans watched on television eleven hours of Yankee propaganda that passed for a documentary account of the American Civil War. What that series revealed—despite its pro-black and pro-northern biases, various mistakes and inaccuracies, and several distortions and cheap shots against Confederates and the South—was not the fascination of Americans with the Civil War, which has been apparent for many years. The real revelation was that fourteen million Americans, having been exposed in American public schools and colleges for many years to bad history and bad historians, were sufficiently captivated by Civil War pictures and documents to watch for eleven hours.

Opinions vary on how well historians teach at the elementary, secondary, and college levels. Most historians consider themselves outstanding teachers, and often can produce student evaluations to prove it. Yet their critics—and millions